

Telephone interview with Liem Bui. Mr. Bui escaped from Saigon on 29 April 1975 as the city fell to the communists, and later witnessed the reflagging ceremony aboard the patrol craft rescue (PCER) HQ-14 before that vessel entered Subic Bay, the Philippines.

Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 8 July 2009.

I'd like to ask you about your recollections of those days. Were you in the South Vietnamese Navy?

No I served in the army.

The ARVN?

Yes. I was a first lieutenant and my wife, who was also serving, was a captain.

Where were you stationed at that time?

I was a political instructor at the Political Warfare Training Center in Saigon, and my wife's Social Warfare School (for women in the services) was next door. She was Head of the Training Section.

What do you remember about those days in April, around the 23rd or the 24th of April?

My father worked for DAO [Defense Attaché Office] and one week before April 29th he told me that the Americans would be withdrawing from Vietnam. He had some connection with the DAO operations so he told me that I had to prepare for him to rescue me, my wife, and my two children. My father passed secret information to me. He said we should be ready to go because the DAO might pick us up at any moment.

Finally, the DAO only picked up only some of the top members and they did not pick up lower ranking members like my dad.

What rank was your dad?

Before my dad worked for the DAO, he was a veteran; his rank was captain. At that time, he was an information collector for the DAO. He did that for about five years. So he was left behind. I was in Saigon and at that time there was no transportation or way to escape. We escaped from the communists a total of three times. In 1948, we escaped from the north in Vietnam when the communists were fighting the French. Then we left our village in Ninh Binh Province and went to Haiphong. In 1954, when the communists defeated the French, we left again, this time for the South. I was about 9 years old. We took an old bus to the port and then got on a small boat, went to the ocean, and then they transferred us to a French ship which went from Haiphong to Vung Tau. For his safety, my dad had already left North Vietnam a year earlier; in 1953 he was already in the training center at the military academy.

My family and I lived in Vung Tau for a few months then moved to Saigon. We lived there until 1975.

What do you recall about those days leading up to the 29th of April 1975?

The last few days we knew that the Viet Cong were very close. At that time we lived right

next to Tan Son Nhut Airport. People from the countryside had already begun coming into Saigon. So I asked some of them what was going on. They said, "The communists are coming."

At that moment we had no way of escaping. We stayed home that day. However, that night they began bombing and rocketing Tan Son Nhut Airport. That was a very critical moment in our lives. It was scary and we didn't know what to do. The environment outside was very dangerous.

My neighbor then told me that maybe the navy was the answer to our problem. Also, my brother-in-law, before he went out on an operation said, "Liem. This operation is very dangerous and I don't know if I can get back. But if something happens in Saigon, try to contact the navy."

About 3 o'clock in the afternoon of April 29, 1975, my uncle, who was also in the army, rode with me on my motorcycle to the Saigon River. We were not in uniform but in civilian clothing. It took us about an hour from Tan Son Nhut Airport to the Saigon River.

We saw that everything very much normal there. The Vietnamese navy ships were there. Everybody was working. It looked like nothing was happening. The only thing I was careful about was staying away from the gate. They were guarding it because that was the headquarters of the Vietnamese navy. There was very heavy security. Because I was wearing civilian clothes, I didn't want to get too close.

For 15 minutes we analyzed the situation and figured out that some high ranking officers of the navy had taken their families through the gate after security had checked them. Then they stayed in one of the buildings. We then realized that we had a chance. My uncle and I decided to go back home, get our families, and return here. We decided to take our chances and hope for good luck.

There was a lot of traffic so I decided to find a secondary road back to Tan Son Nhut Airport. When we got home we told everyone to get ready. I had one car and my uncle another. We told everyone to jump in the two cars. We had two cars for 19 people!

Did you take anything else with you?

No. Just our family members, my camera, and some photographs. We pretty much left everything else behind. Then we drove back to the Saigon River. We did not drive the main road but took secondary roads. With luck we got to the gate. But now we had a big challenge. How to get through the gate? Before we had left home in the two cars, I talked to my sister, Pham Thanh's wife. I told her to bring her husband's papers and any pictures of his ship. That might help us to get in. She carried two or three pictures and some papers. They had only one child, a daughter.

We left the cars about two blocks away from the gate and walked there. Of course, the Vietnamese MPs stopped us. I told everyone not to panic, to stay in one line, and then I pushed my sister to the front. I told them not to say anything and to let me deal with this.

Everybody quietly listened to me and then I talked to the MP and some high ranking officer at the gate and showed them the papers and pictures. They said they would have to verify all of this. But at that very moment, one of Pham Thanh's classmates walked by and recognized Thanh's wife. He talked to the MP and the high ranking officer at the gate and guaranteed that we were Pham Thanh's family and that my sister was his wife. He told them that Pham Thanh was commander of HQ-14 and he was on special duty and that they should let us in.

Then there was another challenge. They asked me who was the last one in line who was a member of Pham Thanh's family. At that moment I pushed my sister all the way to the back of the line and she raised her hand with the picture. Then they opened the gate, let the whole family in, then closed the gate again. This assured that my whole family was in.

When we got in, the entire headquarters was completely quiet. We walked along the waterfront. There were navy ships docked there. I saw the HQ-1, HQ-3, and some big ships docked along the river. At that moment we were facing the river but behind us there was a building they called the courthouse, a big old building. At around 6:30 pm, they opened the door. Oh, my goodness, around a thousand people in that building came out.

These were the people you saw when you had originally come on your motorcycle earlier in the day.

Yes. They had been hiding there. We were standing right at the water's edge. I looked back across the street and I saw a least a thousand people. They walked in order across the street to the water's edge where we were standing.

All these thousands of people you saw were already in the base and had been allowed in before you got through the gate?

Yes. They were already there for several days. All of them were Vietnamese navy families.

But the outer gate that you were able to get through was locked. They would not allow anyone else in?

That's right. There was very tight security at that time. Even people who were wearing military uniforms were not let in. The only reason why they let us in was because my brother-in-law was a ship commander.

And then the people started to be loaded aboard HQ-1. Luckily at that moment, because I was an instructor officer in the Political Warfare Training center, an officer recognized me. And he said, "Liem, come up!" And then I followed those people and climbed aboard HQ-1.

What about the rest of your family?

They followed me. For about 30 minutes they loaded the ship and then I heard the order from the microphone. They asked us to move to the HQ-3, so we transferred over to that ship. What surprised me was that there was no chaos at all. Everyone moved in perfect order and so everyone was safe. The crews of both ships acted very professionally and seemed very calm. Everyone was then sitting on the open deck of HQ-3.

After my family gathered at one spot on the deck, I went to the bridge and saw so many generals up there. I came to the conclusion that this must be the command ship for the entire Vietnamese navy, in charge of the whole evacuation operation. Vinh Loc [Lieutenant General, Chief of Joint General Staff] and ADM Hung were there with at least 10 other admirals and generals.

About half an hour later, HQ-3 began moving down the Saigon River. It was the first ship to cast off. All the other ships then followed, including HQ-1 right behind. We went to Vung Tau

that night and then to Con Son right after that.

Did you have any food and water?

No. Nothing. No one was worried about food and water that evening. The first priority was getting out of the dangerous area. None of us knew where we were going or what would happen.

So you arrived at Con Son Island on the 30th?

Yes. We stayed there. I heard the conversation between the bridge and all the other ships. I also asked my sister to go to the bridge and tell them that the Pham Thanh family was aboard. "Contact HQ-14 and tell Thanh Pham that his family is here and not to go back to Vietnam." But Pham Thanh didn't believe that his family was on HQ-3. He asked the radio operator on HQ-3 if he could talk privately to his wife. So they let him talk to his wife for a few moments. Pham Thanh said, okay, stay there. He had so many things to do at that time. But, at least he knew his family was safe.

None of us knew exactly what was happening at the time. We just sat on the deck and waited. On April 30th everyone was listening to the radio. We heard that Duong Van Minh (the last President of South Vietnam) gave up everything. On May 1st, while we were at Con Son Island, I saw the 7th Fleet far away.

You were able to see ships of the 7th Fleet from Con Son Island?

Oh, yes. At night all their lights were on and it was so bright! We couldn't see them during the day, but we could see them at night with our eyes. It was so very bright.

Were you and your family able to sleep on the deck?

Yes. And they were able to give us some water but no food at all.

When did the ships leave Con Son Island?

On May 2nd, we started moving. People told us that we were moving to the Philippines escorted by the 7th Fleet. Someone told us that the American congress had already granted approval to receive the Vietnamese refugees. I saw some of the destroyers of the 7th Fleet escorting us.

I saw one Vietnamese ship in very poor condition stop and then they transferred all the people aboard to another Vietnamese ship. After we left that empty ship in the ocean, I saw an American ship sink it with its guns. Everyone saw that. We kept going.

What did you do for food?

American ships sent their small boats with food to us. We got some Sunkist oranges from the American ships.

How many days did it take to get to the Philippines?

We entered Subic Bay on May 8th.

What were the conditions on your ship? It must have been very crowded.

Yes. Pham Thanh's daughter became very sick that day because she drank some of the water on HQ-3, which might not have been very clean. And she got diarrhea. Thanh's wife again went to the bridge so they could contact HQ-14, which they did. They told Pham Thanh that he could somehow take her to his ship. Thanh Pham then asked permission for his ship to come alongside HQ-3 so he could pick up his family. He then got permission. We heard over the ship's microphone: "The Thanh Pham family, we transfer you to the HQ-14 in a moment." And then I saw the HQ-14 coming and when the two ships were side by side we were transferred. It was May 3rd.

How did you get across between the two ships?

They tied up together and then we just walked across.

Was there a doctor on HQ-14 to take care of Thanh's daughter?

No. But he had medicine for his daughter. So the little girl was okay. And he had enough rice and water for everyone. On May 5th, I saw a small boat with an American officer come to HQ-14.

That was Donald Swain.

Yes. He came to the ship with another sailor. He was there for a few days until the ship entered Subic Bay.

Did you know about the problem with the Philippine government, that the Vietnamese ships would not be allowed to land?

Yes. The ship's commander announced to the people on the ship that the Vietnamese flag would have to come down. He asked everyone to stand by and prepare for the ceremony. Then the crew lowered the Vietnamese flag and raised the American flag. You can look at the picture I took. I was on top of the bridge and took that picture.

It must have been a very emotional experience to see your flag coming down.

Oh, my goodness. That flag symbolized freedom and what we had been fighting for for generations. At that moment we believed we lost everything. I saw that everyone's eyes were teary, even my dad and myself. That was a very strong emotion.

So it was not only a loss of your flag but your country.

Yes. At that moment we knew we lost everything. We had fought for freedom but in the end it happened like this.

And you had no idea what was going to happen to you.

No. We didn't know what would happen the next day in Subic Bay. The people, the officers, even my brother-in-law, didn't know. We knew we had to follow whatever the Americans asked us to do.

After we got into Subic Bay, they transferred us to a big ship and from there we went to

Guam. We stayed there almost a month in what they called “Tent City.” After that we went by plane to Los Angeles Airport to refuel, and then on to the refugee camp in Pennsylvania.

Fort Indiantown Gap.

Yes.

What was the camp like at Indiantown Gap?

It was an army camp. There may have been 50,000 people there. It was very crowded. We stayed there almost four months.

What did you do for those four months while in the camp?

We stayed in the camp and waited for a sponsor. I started to prepare for a new life by learning English.

How did you get a sponsor?

The Catholic Church had volunteers to help refugees. Our sponsor was a young, brave college student from King’s College, Pennsylvania, Denise Goodwin. Denise still stays in touch with my oldest daughter and one of my sisters to this very day. While my daughter was attending college as a midshipman/engineering cadet at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, she visited Denise and her family on Long Island, New York. Denise told my daughter stories of how she expected to sponsor a small family but instead more than a dozen people stepped off the bus.

All 20 of us, including Pham Thanh, from three families stayed together. There were my two uncles’ families and our family which included Pham Thanh’s family, my sister, my parents, my aunt, my wife, and my two children. That’s why we stayed so long in the camp. Usually it was easier to sponsor a small family like two, three, or four people. Therefore, my second uncle’s family decided to go first with the other sponsor in Lynchburg, VA. He has four children and his wife was pregnant. My family and my first uncle’s family were so big that the church in Wilkes-Barre, PA, sponsored us. We stayed in Indiantown Gap for four months and then left for Wilkes-Barre.

In Wilkes-Barre, my first uncle’s family with only a daughter lived in the St. Mary Church’s rectory, his wife became a cook for the pastor, while my family lived in an apartment--two apartments side by side. After that we rented a big house and moved there.

Were you able to get work right away?

Yes. My background was in architecture so I worked right from the first day in Wilkes-Barre. I walked along the street and saw a firm. I knocked on the door and said, “I’m an architect,” and they hired me right away. I worked for that firm for two years. Then I attended Temple University in Philadelphia and got a bachelor’s degree in architecture. After I graduated I decided to move my family to Virginia and continue to work as an architect.

For the first three years I worked on the renovation of U.S. Embassies all over the world. During the Cold War, the American government decided to reinforce U.S. Embassy buildings. I also worked on the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, the one they had to tear down and rebuild because of the bugs (spy equipment) the Soviets had hidden in the walls.

I'm still in the architecture business. I have my own consulting company.

And in your spare time you work for the TV station.

The TV station is one of many volunteer activities I am involved with. I'm also a Boy Scout leader. I enjoy public service so I volunteer at the local Vietnamese television station as a reporter and a talk show host. I've been doing that for 19 years. It has a strong impact on the Vietnamese community locally and around the world at large.

What are your children doing now?

I have four children. Two were born in Vietnam and two were born in the U.S.

My first child is a girl and second child is a boy. They were only 17 months and 4 months old when we left Vietnam. My oldest girl graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy in King's Point, NY, and now she's a major in the Air Force. She recently served in Iraq for 6 months. My youngest boy is a police officer. He will be a sergeant soon. Another son and daughter both work in the computer field.

When I left my homeland, my wife and I only carried our two children. We didn't have a dollar in our pockets. We had nothing. If we had gotten to the gate at the Vietnamese naval base one hour later, our lives would have been very different. We were very lucky. That was the third time we had escaped from the communists--in '48, '54, and then in '75.

I want to thank you very much for spending time with me tonight and telling me your story.

Thank you so much, Mr. Herman.